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TELEVISION AS AN EMPLOYEE COMMUNICATION TOOL AT LLL

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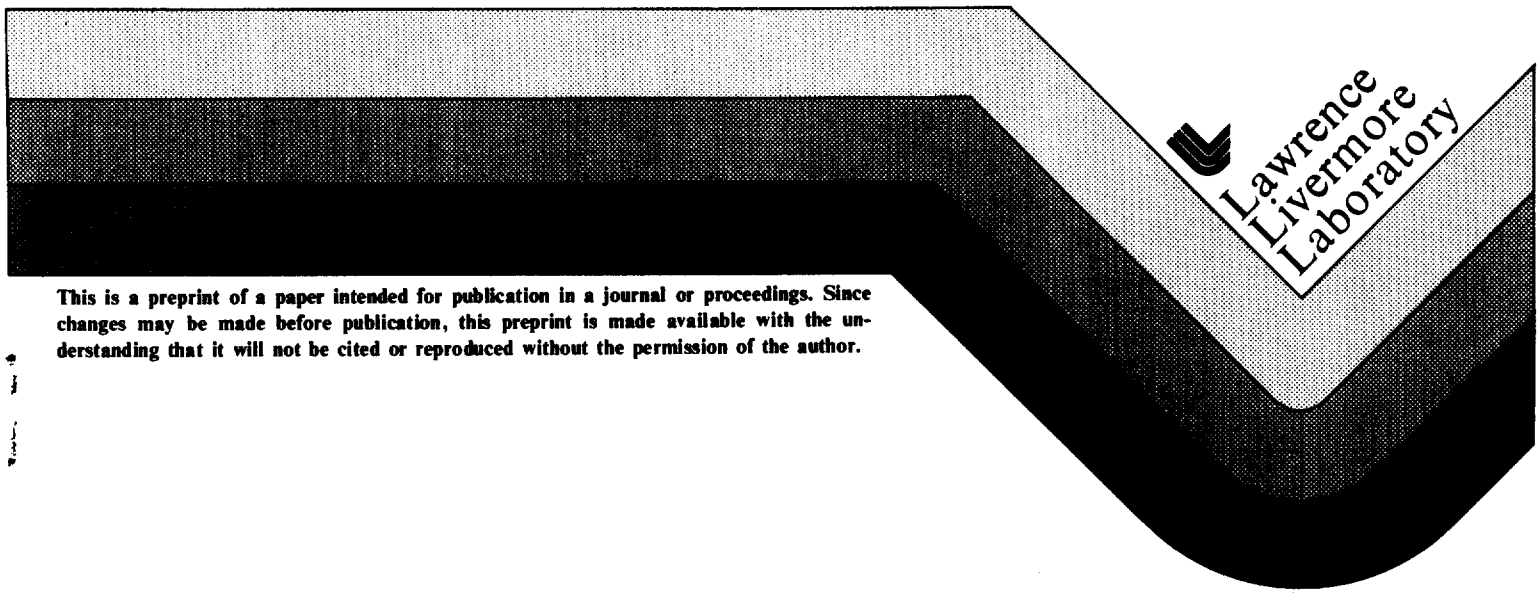

ABSTRACT

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Television as an Employee Communication Tool at LLL

Television's great strength as a news medium is its ability to bring a story to life. Like no other medium, TV can bridge the gap between a fact and its fuller significance.

On the other hand, TV has a disturbing potential to dominate viewers. It communicates in split-second images narrated in rapidly spoken words that cannot be examined. The show rolls on, with or without the puzzled viewer whose tendency, therefore, is to acquiesce in an assertion's plausibility. So the trick in organizational television, which is communication with a purpose, is to insist that the goal be to convey information, not to maximize "ratings" with the techniques of electronic hypnotism.

The Lawrence Livermore Laboratory's televised news magazine for employees, Video Journal, has an especially demanding audience. It is heavily loaded with professionals and those with a professional-level interest in technology. The LLL audience also tends to be sour on the news media, the Laboratory having been the subject of much inaccurate news coverage in recent years. Research suggests that television may be the medium best received by an audience that is suspicious of the news media generally.

Writing news for a television audience is like writing news for a newspaper -- but more so. Because the viewer must catch all TV news the first time through, the cardinal rules of newswriting -- tight construction and focused organization -- are even more important in television than in print. Copy must be geared and timed to the visual material. Numbers, unfamiliar

names and complex subjects should be avoided. And the subject should be one that TV can serve -- an alive, animate subject.

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Television as an Employee Communication Tool at LLL

Jack Saunders

Lawrence Livermore Laboratory

Video Journal is a biweekly television news magazine for employees of the Lawrence Livermore Laboratory, an advanced research and development lab operated by the University of California for the US Department of Energy.

This paper represents one Video Journal broadcaster's view of how a televised news program is best written and assembled when the audience is the large and sophisticated staff of a scientific laboratory.

The Laboratory employs some 7000 people, about half of whom are scientific and engineering professionals. Broadly speaking, they are physicists, chemists, biologists and engineers. But among them are specialists in disciplines as diverse as climate and rock mechanics, plastics and steel, astrophysics and starfish, solar energy and nuclear weapons. In general, the Laboratory designs warheads for the US nuclear arsenal and also engages in high risk, big pay-off energy research financed by the US government.

TV's strength: Bringing news to life

Why an in-house television news program at LLL? Because television, we believe, is an important supplement to the print media in organizational communication, especially if the subject is: 1) beyond the experience of most people, or 2) a person the organization wants to introduce as able, worthy and earnest -- qualities that jump more convincingly off a living color screen than from gray newsprint.

TV's strength is bringing the news to life. Print editors always try to

supply a photograph with unfamiliar ideas. Entirely foreign subjects generally require lots of pictures before they become clear. Television news amounts to a story with lots of pictures. TV can re-create a situation for an audience like no other form of story telling and can bridge the gap between the mere acknowledgment of a fact and the appreciation of its fuller significance.

What kind of LLL news does Video Journal cover? A sampling: When a nuclear powered Soviet satellite crashed into the Canadian wilderness in 1978, Video Journal, via telephone hook-up from the Northwest Territory, talked with Lab employees who participated in the search. We've interviewed a nationally recognized authority on plutonium hazards, serialized an Academy Award nominee for best scientific short and introduced employees to a new supercomputer. We've talked with the head of personnel about the Lab's pay system, brought employees a special report on skin cancer, toured the LLL plutonium building and surveyed the $10 million aftermath of a fairly powerful Livermore earthquake. Lab cameras were on the scene covering underground coal gasification experiments in Wyoming and solar coal gasification tests at White Sands. Our viewers have watched the cruise missile in sea-going launch tests and covered visits to the Laboratory by such figures as General Alexander Haig and former Vice President Nelson Rockefeller.

Avoid dominating the viewers

The written message is laid out before the attentive reader like a model before an engineering student. All the way down to its syntax and punctuation, the message can be scrutinized and reviewed repeatedly to pull sense out of an obscure portion or to divine some veiled implication. The written word is a specimen of a person's thinking.

For the television viewer, however, the message is as fleeting as a nerve signal.

Thoughts, perceived an instant at a time, are continually bumped off the

screen by the next idea.

The viewer cannot halt the presentation to review a previous paragraph which seemed to make no sense. Unless he or she is to become lost, the viewer must keep up.

The fundamental ideas that a proposition is based on are not stored where the viewer can re-examine them the way a reader can flip back in a book.

Unlike the written "model" that opens itself in service before the student, the televised message tends to master the viewer.

The television message dominates by its unflappable smoothness, a technical slickness that can seem to the viewer like arrogance. Unlike a newspaper, the TV newscast seems to promise some of the satisfactions of human conversation. A television announcer gazes directly into the camera and pretends to talk directly to each viewer. The promise of person to person communication, of course, is only the viewer's illusion which can explode into anger when the newscaster interprets events in a way the viewer finds threatening. But the audience cannot interrupt a TV reporter. Shout a question at the tube and you get the next assertion, spoken with confidence and certainty. So the strong tendency of most viewers is to acquiesce in a story's plausibility. This is not to say that most TV news stories are hoaked up, but veteran newsman Roscoe Drummond, in a 1979 column, criticized the technical smoothness and electronic imperturbability of television. In Drummond's opinion, TV news suggests a level of confidence in factual accuracy that viewers wrongly associate with a moon landing's control center. Drummond went on to suggest that the news media candidly and frequently remind the audience that all news is hastily compiled and somewhat biasedly reported.

The trick in writing an organization's televised news program for employees is to use the electronic capabilities of a modern TV studio and yet avoid the speed-of-light razzle dazzle that can reduce viewing audiences to semi-hypnotic submissives.

In commercial television, time is expensive. A minute of Super Bowl time

costs about $300,000. The second-splitting electronic techniques of TV serve to trim every instant of waste from the broadcast day and can contribute to a tight, well packaged, profitable news program. But in organizational television, where the sole purpose is to communicate with people who must work together to succeed, the approach of televised news is somewhat different. The goal is to convey information that sticks because it makes sense.

Organizations need information

The importance of communication in the modern organization is today a matter of broad agreement in the corporate world. A chief executive officer, after all, assembles a workforce, sometimes many thousands, to perform some major function -- supplying oil, for instance, or telephone service, or research and development. Some large organizations spend billions a year doing what they do; their failure could impose ruinous costs on others. No modern society entrusts that kind of responsibility to an organization without demanding regular reports of its progress and problems.

The decisions of that CEO affect not only customers, but also the health, safety and economic survival of the work force. No staff today will allow such decisions to be made entirely out of view, on a basis they do not understand, by people they will never meet.

If an organization is thought of as an organism, information is its oxygen supply. Allow that supply to slip and the organization quickly becomes awkward and slow. After a while it becomes uncoordinated and seems to slur its words. At some critical point the organization will stumble and can collapse if an adequate level of information is not resumed. The system needs a constant flow of information about itself. Modern communication in organizations is more than "the word put out by management." A good employee news service does as much to keep management in touch as it does to keep employees informed.

All of this is generally accepted today. But what methods of communication should an organization use? Television may one day be a mainstay of corporate communication programs. Today it is used sparingly and usually where special circumstances make its special capabilities pay.

LLL is spread over a 640-acre site. Long before Video Journal, the Lab's widely scattered buildings were hooked into the LLL TV network by cable. The cable links employees with a well equipped and expertly staffed television studio, built primarily for continuing education classes. So launching a televised Lab news program did not have to await the hard decision to spend big money on TV equipment.

The LLL audience is heavily loaded with professionals who work on hundreds of separate projects. Also, there is a remarkable level of interest in the Lab's work among non-professional staff members. Such an audience tends to be demanding under any circumstances. But LLL has experienced considerable media coverage in recent years, much of it with a distinct antinuclear slant. Many questions raised in the local press are quite poorly informed. Many of the fears voiced by critics have little basis in fact and employees know it. The experience has tended to create a suspicious LLL news audience, one that frequently comments in a bitter way about media inaccuracy.

With the LLL audience wary of the commercial news media, Lab news writers find they must produce copy that will satisfy the needs of the critical viewer. That means accuracy comes first. It also means anticipating the questions of the audience and answering them in a logical course that does not disrupt the story's inherent organization. The suspicious audience is as alert for the unasked question as it is of the unanswered question.

Mass communication research indicates that television may be an especially good medium for reaching an audience that is sour on the news media. Most TV viewers seem to believe television. A 1978 report in Journalism Quarterly

showed that 76 percent of the college students surveyed for one study said they would believe the television account of a news story if there were a conflict between the way TV reported the news and the way it appeared in a newspaper.

A Canadian study conducted at the same time showed that respondents perceived TV news as more accurate than both newspaper and radio news -- by a convincing margin.

In a Roper Poll sponsored by the National Association of Broadcasters, 48 percent of Americans considered TV "most believable" of four major media; 21 percent chose newspapers, 10 percent magazines and 8 percent radio.

The public's faith in television news has a fairly obvious consequence: A 1977 Gallup poll found that, contrary to a belief common among social scientists, public opinion is highly affected by TV news.

Writing for the whole audience

Video Journal's potential audience is about half scientists and engineers. Managers and supervisors account for some 15 percent. The remainder is not a typical general audience. It is substantially better educated than the general population and has a wide range of interests, skewed, certainly, toward science and technology. The problem: How to televise for the whole audience.

1. In-house mass media tend to concentrate on the obvious jobs -- communicating management's message to employees and communicating the technical world to the layman. Usually forgotten are two other communication needs which, if serviced, would fold into an overall communication plan a substantially larger audience. The two often neglected communication links are employees-to-management and management-to-management.

LLL offers a confidential communication link from employees to management that provides an inquiring employee an answer from a senior manager. Video Journal has no formal role. On a few occasions, however, the program has

followed up on letters from viewers and the results were well received.

Managers certainly have messages for other management and supervisory people. The message targets, in this case, are people who, by definition, are very interested in what's going on and can be counted on to respond -- if they get the message. But at LLL, there are more than 1000 management/supervisory people and many quite different messages to be conveyed. Mass media is an inexpensive way to hit large target groups, "address unknown."

To serve either the employee-to-management or management-to-management communication needs, TV or print news writers must deliberately go after the management audience. Stories must be important. They must be written in a concise, factual "to management" style, not a patronizing, hortatory "from management" style.

Communication in organizations is no longer simply a problem of carrying messages <u>from</u> management. To reach the whole audience, today's well rounded communication program must offer important and interesting information <u>for</u> management.

2. To widen the audience on the non-professional, non-management side, it is a serious mistake to trivialize content. What is needed instead is to widen the scope of relevance. Generally, the broader the context, the larger the potential audience. While a nuts and bolts story on any work of research will likely require some professional background to appreciate, an piece that focuses on the "why" of the work can be important to many people. Don't overlook story possibilities that take viewers to the location of a product's end use, to interesting satellite or branch locations, to allied corporations or institutions involved in joint ventures with your organization. It is interesting for employees to compare their operation, facilities, working conditions, etc. with those in closely associated fields. All of these approaches to a broadened news menu serve to catch a greater segment of a diverse audience.

Writing style for television news:

1. Select animated subjects. Use television's strength. In a 1979 survey, the American Society of Newspaper Editors learned that the public prefers the emotion and sympathy of TV news to the cold facts of a newspaper account. If there is an emotional angle, if a person is delighted or angry, intense or comical, shaken or proud, remember that the viewer wants that brought home. Don't sacrifice the human element to show a series of machines, hardware, schematics, buildings, etc. TV's special capability is to bring the news to life. Don't waste it on a message solely having to do with inanimate subjects.

2. Don't overwrite the material. Keep it crisp and timed to the visuals. No matter how important a point is, you can't make too much of it if you can't match it with visuals. Avoid the trap of setting an inappropriate standard of excellence. The CBS News program 60 Minutes has the resources to gather enough information and visual back-up to make a piece stand up for 10 minutes. The average piece in corporate, non-commercial TV shouldn't time out to much longer than 3 minutes. Professional news writers, who specialized in highly focused and well organized writing, should have no trouble adapting to TV's implacable demand for tight editing. But beginning TV writers are invariably surprised at how little copy it takes to cover even a good selection of visual material. What bedevils organizational TV is the strong tendency to undershoot and overwrite.

3. A "talking heads" show is a waste of television's strength. Indirect quotes by narrator are much better than long speeches by an interview subject. If there is some special reason why an interview subject can tell the story best, the subject's narration is best handled as a voice over. Most subjects, however, will tend to ramble or will sound as though they're reading a prepared statement. Editing will usually have to be severe.

4. Part of the stimulation of continually changing pictures is change. Write surprise into the script. The process of discovery which makes written

communication interesting, must be greatly compressed in a 300-400 word TV story. Check your script to see that the main points the viewer should learn from the story are presented as important moments of discovery. Accompany them with your best applicable visuals.

Sudden edit jumps to the comments of a subject usually work best. Don't re-introduce a person in the narration with each appearance. People who are not well known can ordinarily be identified with a caption only.

5. The writing must be tight. Avoid complicated ideas and unfamiliar words even more than in print media writing. The TV viewer cannot stop the program to puzzle a difficult notion.

6. Figures, especially on complex subjects, can leave viewers snowed. A train of numbers requires mental juggling that few people find comfortable. Viewers will quickly tune out. Charts and graphs can help but they are generally quite lifeless and quickly become dull if overused. Simplify. Find the key number or ratio that tells the story, use a graph to emphasize its significance and then get on with the script.

7. Too many names, especially of people who are not well known, confuse the viewer. The viewer has no time to study or memorize anything presented on television. Every element must be understandable and retainable with only a few seconds exposure.

Editing TV

In print journalism, the writer does a lot of self-editing. Most of what is submitted to an editor we expect should be worthy of running as is. That is not often the way it turns out, but the professional writer tries to turn in a polished job.

In television journalism, the reporter's opportunity to influence the final product is much more variable. A video editor, using complicated electronic gadgetry that the reporter ordinarily finds intimidating, does the

assembling. But if a writer has the time and perseverence to invest, that reporter can have much to say about how a piece comes out.

Just how much influence a television reporter has over the final version of a story is determined largely by the method used in gathering the material. What we'll call Method #1 is the orderly way of working. It is the way the reporter, camera crew, editor and news subjects all prefer. Method #2 is sometimes called "winging it." A TV journalist must be able to do both.

Method #1) The sequence of events amounts to this: Contact and interview the subject; survey the visual opportunities; write a script annotated with suggested visuals; schedule interview segments in shooting script, complete with the questions -- and even suggested answers, based on previous interviews; give the annoted shooting script to the camera crew; shoot -- more than you think you'll need. The reporter using Method #1 then returns to the studio and goes over the tape with the editor. Here's where the reporter can work with -- and probably lean on -- the editor to get what he or she had in mind.

Method #2) The routine is this: Make contact; take notes; list story's vital points; compose an opening and a close on the spot in your head; shoot them.

Meanwhile, the crew shoots everything that moves, hoping that some of it will be relevant.

Later, back at the studio, often with little guidance from the reporter, the editor weaves together enough visual material to stand up as a unit and then calls the reporter. The reporter is told which visuals were used in what order and for what time lengths. From that information the reporter will write a voice-over script to be taped in the studio and patched into the assembled visuals. Because the narration must, to some degree, match the visual material, the editor must require the reporter to write within very confined limits -- frequently, plus or minus a few seconds.

While Method #1 is comfortable and controlled, Method #2 is hectic and

dangerous. The TV reporter must be able to to either way, depending on the circumstances. But it's obviously much easier to get a well organized, high-informative piece out of Method 1. Method #2 inevitably forces the reporter to write from incomplete information and so lays a heavy burden on the most valuable skill of the news craft: judgment.